HAPPY BACK YOGA

Your Complete Yoga Guide For A Pain Free Back

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Happy Back Yoga

Your Complete Yoga Guide For A Pain Free Back

By Julie Schoen

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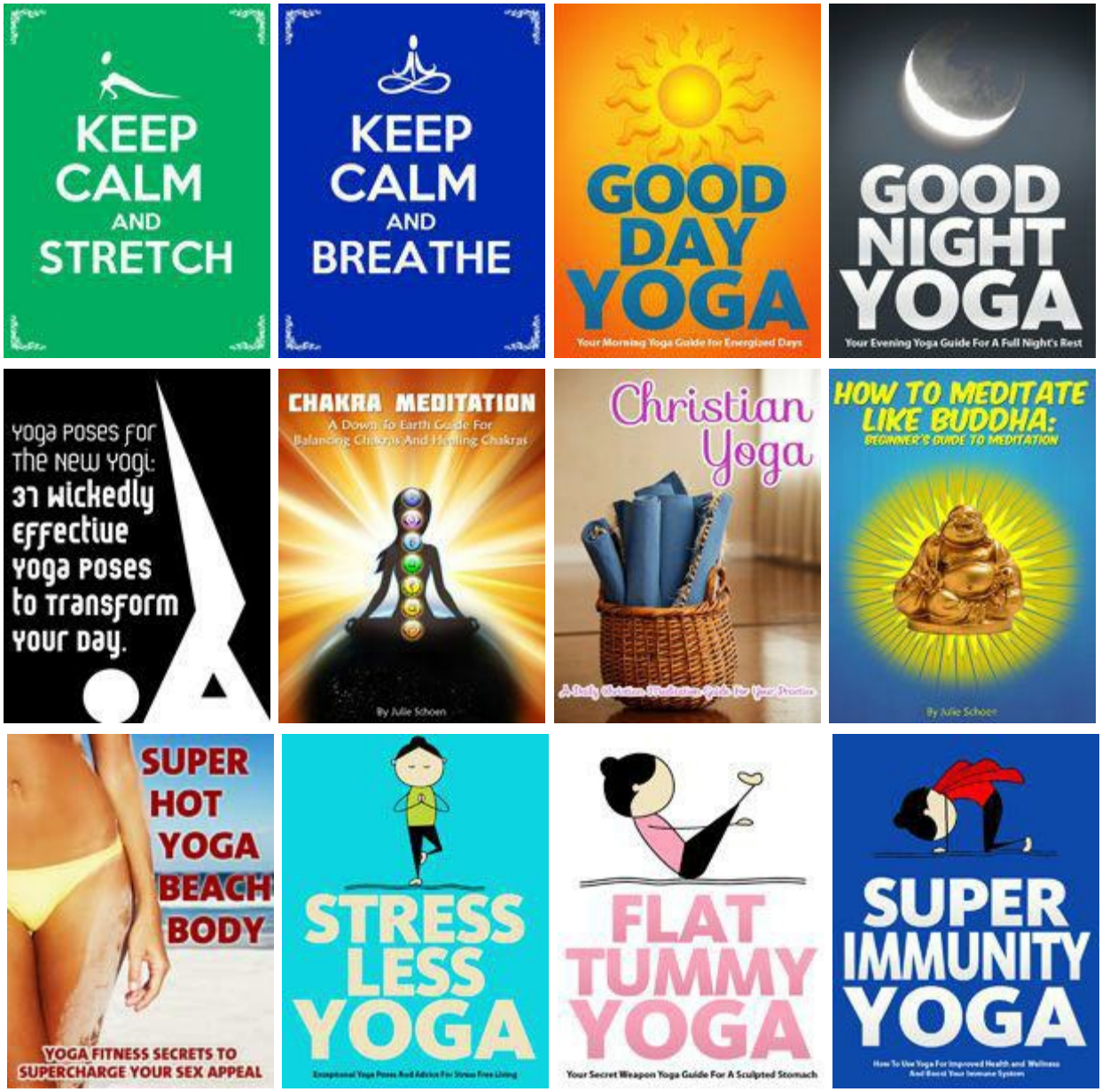
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INTRODUCTION

I never thought about the health of my spine until the day that I lost it. Hit by a car and crumpled on the asphalt, my back would never be the same. It took years before I was able to sit comfortably – a relief after spending months forced to lie flat on my back wherever I went. Not only did my injuries affect my life physically, but also they dramatically impacted my emotional health.

In constant pain, I slipped into depression. I lost friends. I was miserable but emotionally I couldn't even find the strength to care.

I went to chiropractors to ease my pain, but the effects wore off almost immediately. They were treating the symptoms instead of getting to the root of the problem: the health of my spine.

Thankfully it wasn't long after my accident when I stumbled into my first yoga class. Unable to do the majority of the poses, I worked where I could. Amazingly, even without participating in the majority of the class, I began to feel better. The pain in my back was starting to melt away. I felt a lightness that I hadn't felt since the accident and I was finally remembering what it felt like to smile.

Curious to why these simple yoga moves were helping my back so much, I began to study yoga, learning from masters around the world and eventually getting multiple accreditations to teach. What I found was that the entire practice of yoga revolves around maintaining the health of the spine. In each pose, the spine is a crucial element, providing the literal backbone for every movement and position.

Now as an instructor myself, I emphasize the importance of the spine to all of my students, even those who have never injured their back or experienced any discomfort in the area. I know from firsthand experience how crucial the health of the spine is to the overall health of the body and mind.

So whether you have suffered through a back injury like me or are the picture of health, everyone can benefit from having a happy back – one that is strong, flexible, long, and supple.

Let's get moving – your happy back is just a yoga session away!

Love,
Julie

SECRETS OF THE SPINE

The spine is a complex structure that serves as the central axis of our bodies. A healthy spine is made up of four natural curves, each one serving a function to help the body withstand gravity and to evenly distribute the weight of the body to the extremities that stem from it. In addition to the curves, the spine relies on spongy discs in between each vertebra that help to absorb shock and pressure caused by day-to-day activities like walking, running, injuries, and even just withstanding gravity.

Not only is the spine anatomically important to the muscular-skeletal system, but it also serves as a vital life-sustaining tool. By functioning as a barrier, your spine protects the delicate spinal cord, which serves as the primary form of communication between the body and brain. If the space in the spine becomes too narrow, which can happen through injuries or lack of movement, the spinal cord can literally be pinched, causing serious health complications and extreme pain. The healthier your spine is the better the communication becomes between the two.

Energetically, your spine is known as Susumna, the major channel in which energy moves from one extreme to the other. Like a hose filled with running water, if Susumna gets unnaturally bent, injured, or kinked, the energy won't flow, leaving you to deal with a myriad of ailments, including lethargy, depression, addiction, pain, and obesity.

The spine is the ultimate key to health. It unlocks a lifetime filled with youth, activity, and happiness.

In order to keep the spine healthy and mobile, we have to improve its strength and flexibility, all while lengthening. To do this, we must move the spine out of its comfort zone and into positions that may seem unnatural when compared to the positions we stay in throughout most of the day (slouched in a chair, crammed in a car, or hunched over a desk). And how do we best do that? Through poses masterfully created by the ancient yogi masters centuries ago to restore and maintain the health of the spine, your lifeline, your secret to longevity.

"Yoga is the fountain of youth. You're only as young as your spine is flexible."
— Bob Harper

HAPPY BACK FLOW A

Benefits:

This sequence warms up the body while working on releasing tension in the hips. As the flexibility of your hips improves, discomfort in the low back will disappear. Focus on holding the poses for several breaths, using the exhalation to release deeper into the joint of the hip.

1. Virasana (Hero's Pose), *variation*

Kneel on the ground, tucking your toes under and balancing on the balls of the feet. Bring your hands to heart center and focus on your breath. If it is uncomfortable on your feet to keep them tucked, feel free to begin in traditional Virasana, with the tops of the feet resting on the mat.

2. Anjaneyasana (Low Lunge), *variation*

Step back with one foot from Virasana to come into Low Lunge. Bring the knee of the back leg onto the mat, keeping the toes of the back foot tucked to help you press down with the back leg. Adjust the front leg so that the knee is directly over the ankle. Press your hands into your thigh to help straighten the back. You should feel a deep stretch in the hip of the back leg. If you do not feel this, widen your stance, keeping the same alignment of the front leg.

3. Parivrtta Anjaneyasana (Revolved Low Lunge)

Place the hand of the front leg down on the mat inside of your front foot. Extend the other hand, creating one straight line with both arms. Lengthen the spine by reaching the crown of your head forward then open the chest by rolling the bottom ribs forward and the top ribs back. If it is comfortable for your neck, finish the twist by gazing up at your top hand.

Step forward to stand at the top of your mat and repeat **Poses 2** and 3 on the other side.

4. Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose)

From Parivrtta Anjaneyasana step back into a plank position and then lower down to Chaturanga. Keep the body parallel to the mat and the elbows in close to the body. Your elbows should never go above the shoulders in this pose in order to keep the shoulder joint safe. Look forward and keep the neck and spine long. If you need to drop the knees in this pose until you build enough strength feel free to do so.

5. Ashtangasana (Eight-Limbed Pose)

From Chaturanga, lower your knees, chest, and chin to the ground. Keep the gaze forward and the elbows in close to the body. The unique position of this pose helps to relieve tension in the back while also increasing its flexibility.

6. Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward Facing Dog Pose)

Press up into Upward Facing Dog by rolling the body forward and lifting the hips and legs off the mat. With your hands directly under the shoulders, push the upper body forward between the arms, opening the chest. If there is too much pressure on the lower back in this pose, you can drop the hips and legs down to the ground and practice Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) instead.

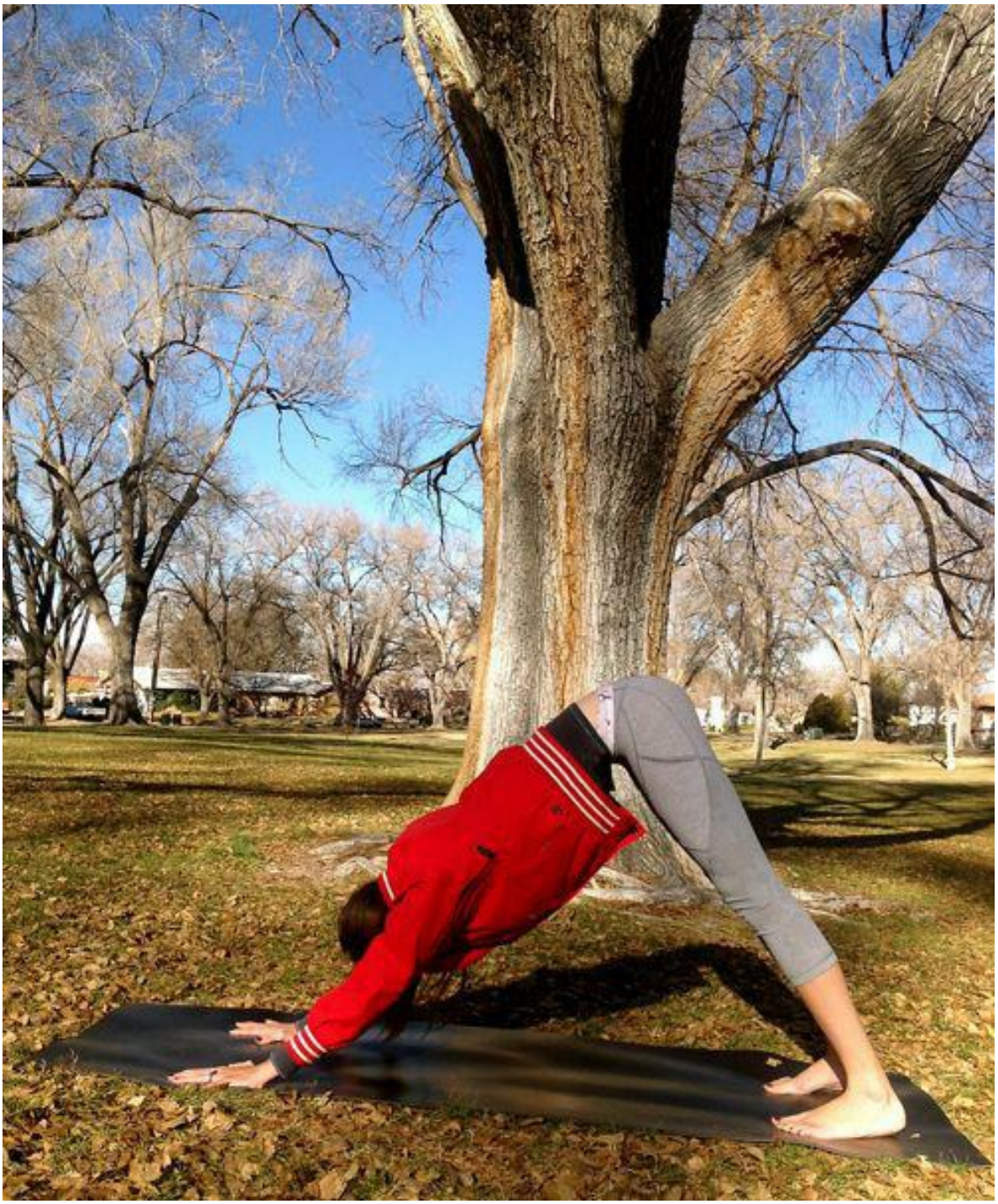
7. Balasana (Child's Pose)

Rock the body back, bending the knees and bringing your forehead to the mat. Gently extend your arms forward, palms down. Begin to lower your hips down towards your heels, lengthening the spine and stretching the back.

8. Virasana (Hero's Pose), *variation*

From Child's Pose, reach the hands over your head and then place them on the ground behind you. Allow the head to gently drop back as you open the chest.

9. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog)



Bring the hands back over your head and down on the mat in front of you. Spread the fingers wide and press up into Down Dog by straightening the arms and legs. Press the hands into the mat and lift up and out of the shoulders. Your feet should be hip-width apart with the heels directly behind the toes. Engage the legs by lifting the kneecaps and rolling the inner thighs back. Focus on lengthening the back body, especially the spine, with each breath.

To help loosen the neck, feel free to shake your head up and down, yes and no while in this pose.

10. High Lunge, *variation*

Step one foot forward between your hands, lifting into this variation of high lunge. The knee of your front leg should be bent directly over the ankle, making the thigh parallel to the mat. The back leg should be straight and lifted, balancing on the ball of the foot. To work into the shoulders, bend the elbows and squeeze the shoulder blades together, creating cactus arms. Hold this pose for several breaths, allowing the body to sink deeper into the hips with each

exhalation.

11. High Lunge, *variation*

Interlace your hands behind your back and begin to hinge forward from the hips. Allow the chin to come in towards your chest as you lower the crown of your head down towards the ground. Try to keep the arms straight as you lift the hands up higher behind your back. Keep pressing into the ball of your back foot to maintain your balance. Hold this pose for 3 to 4 breaths, allowing the joints of the hip and shoulder to loosen.

12. High Lunge, *variation*

Place your hands on the ground on the inside of your front foot. Feel the stretch deepen in your back leg and hip joint. Hold the pose for two full breaths, keeping the back of the neck long.

13. Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged Pigeon Pose), *variation*

Allow the knee of the back leg to come down to the mat as you position your front knee close to the wrist of the same hand. Adjust your legs so that you are lowering your hips as close as possible to the ground while sitting straight up. You can intensify this stretch by moving the foot and shin of the front leg so that they become more parallel to the front edge of the mat.

Begin to lower your body over the bent front leg, folding from the hip creases. Allow your forehead to rest on the ground or on top of stacked forearms. Rest in this pose for several minutes, using the breath to help relax areas of the body that are holding tension or are resisting being stretched.

Go back to **Pose 9** and repeat Poses 10-13 on the other side.

HAPPY BACK FLOW B

Benefits:

This flow helps to improve the alignment of your spine through movements that lengthen and then are counteracted by rounding. This sequence also provides gentle stretches for the shoulders and hips while also increasing the strength of the abdominal muscles, which are an important aspect to keeping the spine strong and balanced.

1. Tadasana (Mountain Pose)

Stand at the top of your mat with your hands in prayer position at heart center. Feel your feet ground down, balancing the weight of your body through all four corners. It should feel like you are actually pressing the ground away from you. Lengthen both sides of the ankles and gently engage the muscles of the thighs by lifting the kneecaps. Roll the inner thighs back to help create more space in your lower back. Scoop the tailbone down and under to help the

spine curve naturally, protecting the lower back from over arching. Feel the vertebrae of the spine naturally stack on top of each other as you lengthen your back by feeling as if someone is pulling you straight up by a string attached to the top of your head. Keep your chin parallel to the ground and the neck long on all four sides.

As you breathe in this pose, feel free to shut your eyes, working on maintaining your center of gravity. Stay in this pose for as long as you'd like – there's a lot of benefit to learning how to stand properly!

2. Urdhva Hastasana (Upward Salute)

Bring your hands overhead, touching the palms together and bringing your gaze up. Try to keep the same alignment from Tadasana – it's harder when you extend your arms so really pay

attention to your hips and lower back. Allow the chest to open as you feel a gentle stretch through the shoulders.

3. Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose), *variation*

Gently push the hips forward as you begin to allow the head to drop back behind you. Open the arms and lift the chest up towards the sky. Relax the muscles in the shoulders and back as you work to deepen the backbend. Breathing in this pose does feel restricted so stay for as long as you can, slowly coming back up to stand when you are finished.

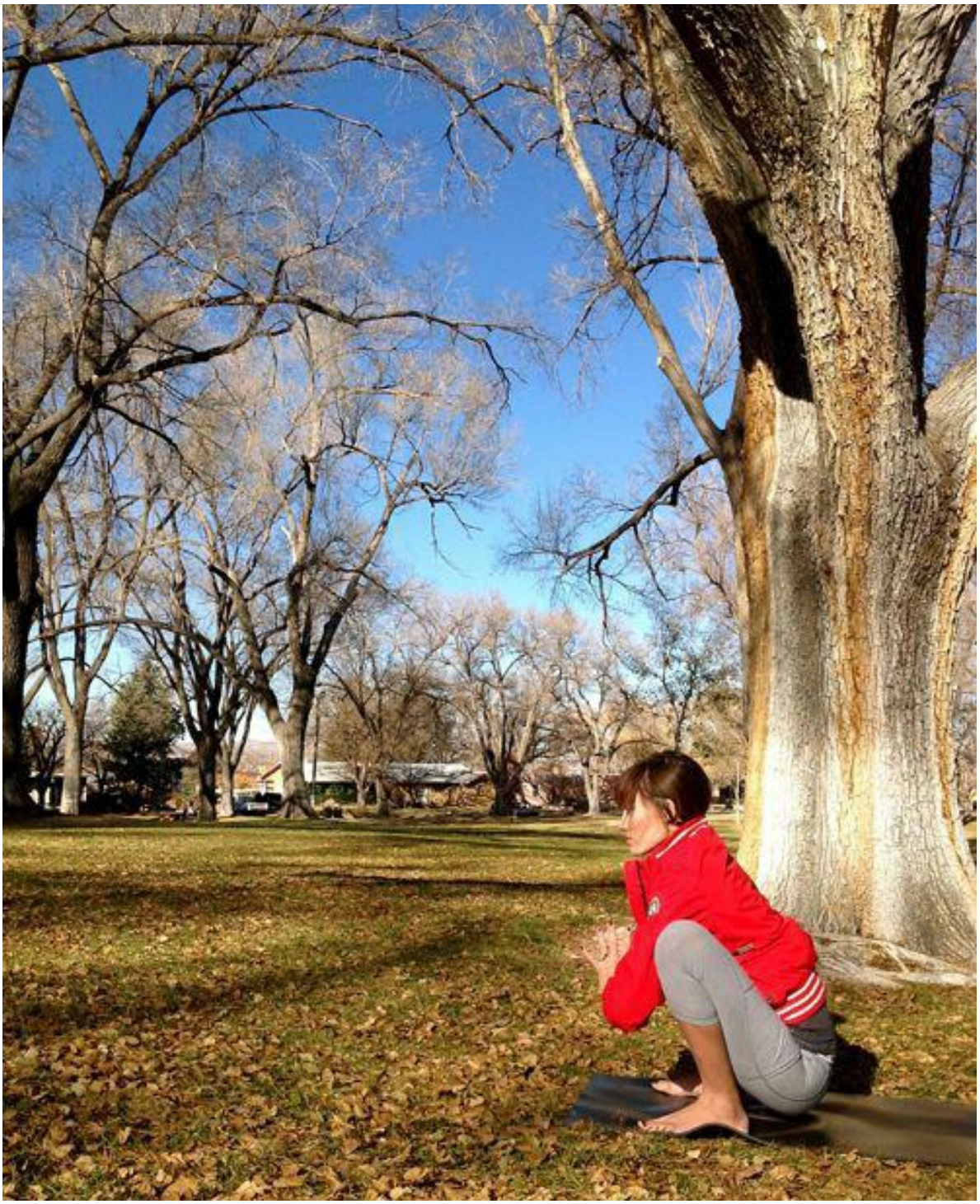
4. Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend Image)

Bending from the hips, bring the hands down to the ground. If your hands do not touch, allow them to rest on your shins or thighs. Allow the head to be heavy so that your neck can relax and lengthen. Keep the legs strong and engaged by pulling the kneecaps up. To more effectively perform this pose, pull the lower abdomen up and in. The spine should feel like it is lengthening as you continue to get deeper and deeper into the fold. Hold this pose for 4 to 5 breaths.

5. Malasana (Garland Pose), *variation*

Bend the knees and come into a squat position. Allow the heels to lift off the mat as you round your back and bring yourself into a tight ball. Bring your chin in towards your chest and press your hands down into the mat. This pose feels great for relieving tension in all parts of the back.

6. Malasana (Garland Pose)



Move your feet apart several inches so that your heels touch the ground while you are in a low squat. Bring your hands in between your legs and place them on the ground in front of you. Use the elbows to gently press into your legs, helping to open the hips and straighten the back. If it is too difficult to bring your heels down to the mat, place a rolled blanket under your heels so that you can still evenly distribute your weight through your feet.

7. Navasana (Boat Pose)

From Malasana, roll back to sit, balancing on your sit bones. Keep the spine straight by squeezing the shoulder blades together and keeping the chest lifted. Lift the feet off of the mat with bent knees (this is Half Boat and you are welcome to stay here). If you are comfortable here, try to straighten the legs while continuing to lift them away from the ground. The core should be working a lot to keep the legs lifted and the spine straight. Remember to breathe.

Hold this pose for 5 to 6 full breaths if possible.

8. Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose)

Lower your body down to the mat, bending the knees and bringing your heels towards your body in line with the hips. Begin to lift the hips off of the ground and as you do so tuck the shoulders under your body by squeezing the shoulder blades together. Lift the hips higher by pressing your feet into the mat. You can interlace your fingers under your body to help deepen the stretch in the shoulders. Allow your chin to come towards your chest, focusing your gaze on your belly, watching it rise and fall with each breath. Hold this pose for 8 to 10 breaths before lowering back down towards the mat.

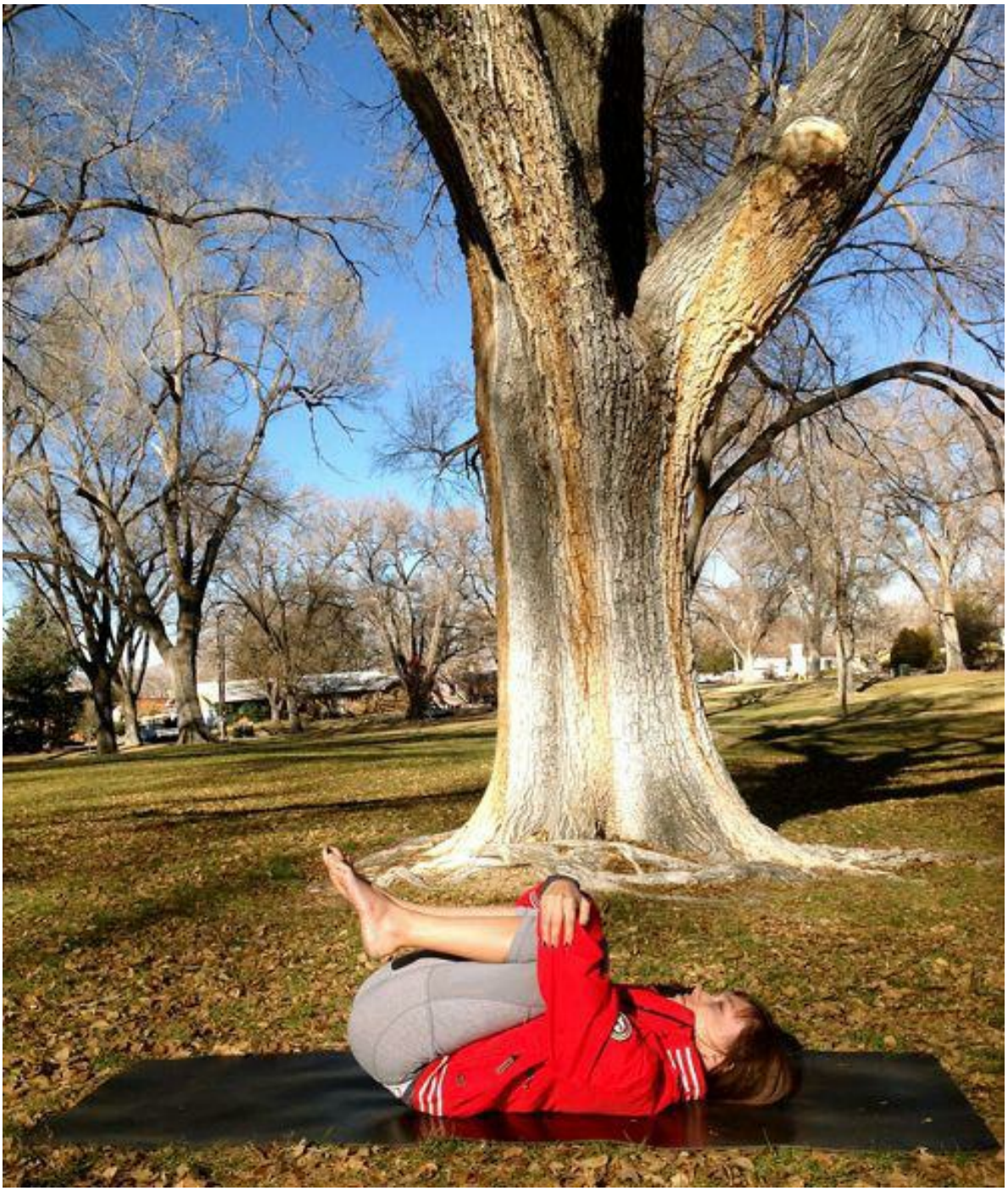
9. Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose)

Lying flat on your back with knees bent and heels close to your hips, extend your arms up over your head like you are holding something heavy over your body. Bend your elbows and bring the hands down to the mat by your ears, fingers facing your toes. Squeeze the elbows in so that they are in line with your shoulders. Begin to lift your hips away from the ground. Press your hands into the mat, beginning to straighten your arms. Be sure to squeeze the shoulders in towards the centerline of your body to make sure that they stay secured in the joint. Work on straightening the arms completely as you lift the hips up more. Allow the head to drop gently.

Hold this pose for 4 to 6 breaths (longer if it feels good) before slowly lowering your body back down to the ground.

If this pose is too difficult for your body right now, do another set of **Bridge Pose**.

10. Apanasana (Knees-To-Chest Pose)



Lying flat on your back, hug your knees in towards your chest, grabbing opposite elbows, forearms, or wrists. Squeeze the knees together and closer towards your chest with each inhalation. As you exhale, work on pressing your entire spine down towards the mat. It can also feel good to rock back and forth and side-to-side in this pose to massage the spine.

11. Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Big Toe Pose), *variation*

Extend your legs on the ground straight in front of you. Lift one leg up bringing it as close as possible to your body while keeping the other leg flat on the ground. Reach for your lifted thigh, interlacing the fingers and gently pulling that leg closer towards your body to stretch the back of the leg as well as the hip of the other leg.

12. Jathara Parivartanasana (Stomach Churning Pose), *variation*

Lower the lifted leg across the body and down onto the ground, keeping it perpendicular from the body. Bend the knee of the bottom leg, using your hand to reach for the ankle. Pull the foot of the bent knee in towards the body. Work to get both shoulders flat on the mat. This pose does wonders for low back pain so rest here for as long as you would like.

Repeat **Poses 11** and 12 on the other side.

13. Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclined Bound Angle Pose)

Come to lie down flat on your back in the center of your mat. Bring the soles of the feet together allowing the knees to fall out to the sides. Your arms should rest on either side of the body, palms up and fingers curling in naturally towards the hand. Relax the muscles surrounding the hips and lower back to allow gravity to gently pull the knees down closer to the ground. Close your eyes and quietly observe the breath being as still as possible. Rest in this pose for as long as you can.

HAPPY BACK FLOW C

Benefits: Your spine will love the range of motions you take it through in this flow, which is filled with backbends and forward folds. You will open the shoulders and increase their range of motion, which helps to improve posture and reduce tension in the upper back. Then you will strengthen the body with poses like Locust and Chaturanga Dandasana. Your back will feel so good after this flow – you will want to do it every day!

1. Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose)

Sit on your mat with your legs in front of you. Cross one leg on top of the other, bringing the heel of that foot as close as you can to the opposite hip. Bend the knee of your bottom leg, bringing that heel as close as you can to the other hip. Try to stack the knees on top of each other by evenly distributing the weight.

Raise one arm above your head, palm facing back. Bend that arm at the elbow and walk the hand down your spine, working to get the elbow right above your head. Use the hand of your other arm to reach for the raised hand, clasping fingers. Use your grip to increase the stretch of your shoulders. Make sure your chin stays lifted, parallel to the ground, and your chest lifts up.

If this pose is too intense to start with, begin in Balasana (Child's Pose) and move this pose to the end of this flow.

2. Tadasana (Mountain Pose), *variation*

Come to stand at the top of the mat. You will need a strap for this pose. If you don't have one available, you can use a dog leash or even a sweatshirt or t-shirt.

Hold your strap in between your hands out in front of your body. Your hands should be wider than shoulder-width apart to start (it will take a few times before you know how wide your hands should be). Keeping the chin lifted, raise your arms up over your head on an inhalation. As you exhale, lower the arms behind your back, keeping them straight. You should be able to

lower the hands all the way down without bending the elbows. However, you should feel like there are some “sticky” points as you lower the strap down. When you find these points that create resistance, hold the strap there and breathe with the chest open. It should burn – this is good for the cells around the shoulder joints and in the back.

Do this back and forth several times, adjusting the width of your hands as necessary.

3. Utthita Hastasana in Tadasana (Raised Hands in Mountain Pose)

Standing in Mountain Pose at the top of your mat, extend the arms up into the air with the palms

facing each other. Feel all four sides of the body lengthen as you reach up. But be sure to keep the feet grounded and the legs strong to stay balanced in this pose. Stay in this pose for a full breath.

4. Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)

Fold forward, bending from your hips. Keep the kneecaps lifted and the inner thighs rolling back. Allow the head to feel heavy and the neck to lengthen. Pull the navel up and in to deepen the fold. Feel as your spine lengthens with each breath.

5. Ardha Uttanasana (Half Standing Forward Bend)

As you inhale, squeeze the shoulder blades together, straightening the spine to a flat tabletop. Gaze forward as you open the heart. With an exhalation, plant your hands into the ground, bending the knees and stepping back into Plank Pose.

6. Plank Pose

Adjust your hands so that they are directly under your shoulders. Your feet should be hip-width apart and the legs strong and straight, lifted off of the ground. Your body should be parallel to the ground, using the core to help hold you steady. Bring your gaze forward, but keep the neck relaxed. Hold this pose for 1 to 2 breaths.

7. Chaturanga Dandasana (Four-Limbed Staff Pose)

Keeping the gaze forward, begin to bend your elbows as you exhale. Keep the elbows in close to the body, grazing the ribs as you lower down. To keep the shoulder joints safe, you should never allow your elbows to get higher than your shoulders. Keep the body parallel to the ground, dropping the knees down if you need.

8. Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward Facing Dog)

From Chaturanga Dandasana, place the tops of the feet down on the mat, pressing the body through the arms. Your hands and the tops of the feet should be the only parts of your body that are touching the ground. Keep the chest lifted to help open the upper back. If this pose places too much pressure on your lower back, you can lower the hips down to the ground and work into the back from a less intense backbend, Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose).

9. Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog)

From Up Dog, begin to lift the hips up, flipping the feet over so the soles are touching the ground. Spread the fingers wide on the mat, pressing down evenly through all parts of the hands. Begin to bring your shoulder blades together as you move your upper body back between your arms, ears in line with the biceps. The legs should be straight and strong, kneecaps lifted and inner thighs rolling back. Begin to lower your heels down towards the mat, lifting your toes slightly to help shift the weight. Make sure your neck stays loose throughout this pose, shaking the head from side to side if necessary. Hold this pose for several breaths, getting a deeper stretch in the back body with each exhalation.

Step to the top of your mat, coming back into Tadasana Pose.

10. Vrksasana (Tree Pose)

Lift one foot off of the ground, bringing the sole of your foot to the calf, the upper thigh, or the hip crease of the other leg. Your standing leg should be strong and not bending. Gently press your hips forward while you simultaneously press the knee of the lifted leg back. Work on lengthening the spine and the sides of the body. Bring your hands to heart center or raise them over your head, palms facing each other.

In order to balance, keep your eyes focused on one point in front of you. Repeat on the other side.

11. Natarajasana (Lord of the Dance Pose)

Standing at the top of the mat, lift one foot off of the ground, bending the knee and bringing the foot up towards your buttocks. With the same hand, reach back and grab onto the ankle from the

inside, thumb up. Extend your other arm up over your head.

To get into this pose, first find your one point of focus and do not shift your eyes. Next, begin to lower your body down, bending from the hip. Balance this action by kicking back and up with the lifted leg. The harder you kick the easier it will be to balance. Keep the lifted leg in the center of your body so that one day the foot will appear right above your head.

If you fall out of this pose, don't hesitate to get right back in. And always remember that doing yoga is called practice for a reason! Repeat this pose on the other side.

12. Salabhasana (Locust Pose), *variation*

Lower down to your stomach (opting for a Vinyasa if you'd like – Uttanasana, Ardha Uttanasana, Plank, Chaturanga, Up Dog, and then Down Dog), bringing the legs together and touching the sides of the feet. Interlace your hands behind your back, clasping the fingers. Keeping the feet down on the ground, begin to lift the hands up away from your back, straightening your arms. As you do this, allow the chest to lift off of the mat, working on strengthening the muscles of your upper back as you do so. Hold this pose for 4 to 5 full breaths before lowering back to the ground. Rest on your belly for a few breaths before moving into the next pose.

13. Salabhasana (Locust Pose)

Once again, keep the legs together and sides of the feet touching. Extend the arms away from the body palms down, making a capital letter “T”. On an inhalation, begin to lift the arms up off of the ground, lifting the chest at the same time. Simultaneously, lift the feet off of the ground, keeping the legs and feet touching. Look up as you lift off of the ground – your body follows where your eyes go.

This pose works the entire spine, so it is not easy. Do your best to smile as you work, keeping the mind in a positive state. Hold this pose for as long as you can before lowering back to the mat. Rest for several breaths before moving to the next pose or repeating this pose for a second time.

14. Dhanurasana (Bow Pose)

Lying on your stomach, begin to bend the knees, lowering your feet towards your heels. Reach back for your feet, grabbing onto the insides of your ankles, thumbs up. It's very important to keep the knees and ankles in line with your hips as you do this pose, so focus on pulling everything in, arms and legs, towards the center body.

As you inhale, kick the feet back into your hands, lifting the chest off of the ground as you do so. If possible, begin to lift the thighs off of the ground as well, getting a small rocking motion in your hips. Continue to kick up and back higher as you lift the chest and look up. While performing this pose you are increasing flexibility of the total spine, shoulders, and hips – it's the whole package!

15. Ustrasana (Camel Pose)

Come to kneel at the top of your mat. Use two fists to measure the correct distance between your knees. Your feet should be directly behind your knees. Bring your hands to your lower back. Press the hips forward, working to get the knees, thighs, and hips in one line. As you do this, start to bend backwards, gently dropping the head and bending one vertebra at a time.

If you can go deeper into the pose, move your hands to your heels, keep pressing the hips forward and lifting the chest up. Because this pose is such an intense heart opener, know that you may feel intense emotions. Do your best to stay in this pose as long as you can, using your breath to stay focused.

16. Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Big Toe Pose)

Lying flat on your back with legs extended out in front of you, lift one leg straight off of the ground with the sole of the foot facing the sky. Using a strap (or whatever you have), hook it over the sole of the foot. Pull the foot in towards the body to stretch the back of the leg. Keep the shoulders on the mat and the grounded leg straight. Be sure to keep the muscles of your face relaxed. Hold this pose for several breaths.

17. Supta Padangusthasana II (Reclining Big Toe Pose II)

From the last pose, begin to lower the lifted leg to the side. Continue to hold onto the strap and keep the shoulders and total spine grounded. Allow gravity to pull the foot closer towards the ground to help open the hip and increase its range of motion. This is a great pose for relieving low back pain so hold it for several breaths.

Then go back to **Pose 16** and repeat Poses 16 and 17 on the other side.

YOUR TOP 10 BACK QUESTIONS ANSWERED

1. Why does my back constantly hurt?

Back pain is the most common complaint I hear as a yoga instructor. It seems like everyone, no matter their age, has at one time or another experienced uncomfortable pain in their back. For the majority of people the pain they feel is not from a serious accident or injury, but instead is from how they are living day after day.

One of the major sources of back pain comes from the extraordinary amount of time that we spend sitting in chairs each day. Whoever invented the chair did not take into consideration the anatomy of the human body and what it needs to stay healthy.

Two things happen when we sit in chairs that contribute to the pain we feel in our backs. First, the muscles of our hips contract and are very rarely given the opportunity to stretch. This constant contraction has created an epidemic of people with extraordinarily tight hips. As the hips begin to tighten, they pull the spine forward and out of alignment. Take a second to look at the position of your hips, legs, and backs when you sit. If you transfer that position to a standing body, you will see that when the legs straighten the spine is then pulled forward. This is why one of the keys to healing back pain is to increase the flexibility and strength of the hips so that when you stand, your spine can be properly aligned.

The second thing that happens when we sit is that we collapse into our lower backs, which puts a lot of pressure on the vertebrae and decreases the space in between each. Imagine that your pelvis is a bowl filled with water. Place your hands on your hip points and imagine that you are holding on to the top edges of the bowl. Notice that when you sit the bowl tends to tip backwards, spilling all of the water. This action is the source for a lot of the pain we feel in our backs. To help decrease back pain, remind yourself to lift the hip points (the edges of your bowl) up and then slightly forward, so that none of the “water” in your bowl spills. This simple action helps to keep the space in between the vertebrae that makes the spine healthy and supple.

Tight shoulders are also a big contributing factor to back pain for the same reason as tight hips. Inflexible shoulder joints result in a rounded upper back and hunched shoulders, which again pull the spine forward and out of alignment. By loosening and strengthening the shoulders, we are able to release tension and pain in the back that is felt by many on a daily basis.

2. How can I make my back hurt less at work?

If work has you in a chair all day, there are a few simple things you can do to help reduce back pain. First, get up and move often. At least every hour you should stand up and stretch your shoulders, hips, and back, even if it is just for a minute or two. Not only will this help ease back pain, but it will actually help you be more productive as well.

If you are able to, try switching out your chair for a large exercise ball. The shape of the ball helps to relax the muscles of the hips by not placing the thighs and entire upper leg parallel to the floor like chairs do. The ball is also great for strengthening your core since you will be maintaining your balance as you sit. You can even use it to help stretch your back – as long as you resist the urge to bounce up and down or roll it across the office floor it shouldn't be a problem to use it instead of your chair!

3. Which poses should I avoid if I have injured my back?

Each back injury is different, varying in location and degree of severity. Yoga is one of the best ways to help heal back injuries, so as long as the poses are done correctly and mindfully, there are very few that should be completely avoided.

That being said, you need to be very careful when practicing yoga, always listening to your body and moving slowly as you enter a pose. This is always true, but even more so if you have a back injury. Don't be afraid to avoid certain poses if you feel like they will cause discomfort to your back. There will always be time to practice more yoga – right now you need to be taking care of your body.

Having injured my back myself, I spent several years not being able to do some of the poses that my classmates did or that were demonstrated in books and magazines. The following list of poses should be approached with caution if you have an injured back. Depending on your injury, they may or may not feel okay to practice without modifications.

- **Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose)** – If this pose feels uncomfortable, try sitting on the edge of a rolled blanket to help lift the pelvis and take away some of the pressure from the low back.
- **Dhanurasana (Bow Pose)** – If you find this pose uncomfortable, it is best to hold off practicing it until you feel like your back has regained strength and flexibility. Once you have begun to heal, this pose will be very beneficial for keeping the spine healthy and supple.
- **Ustrasana (Camel Pose)** – Some modifications for this pose include tucking the toes so that the heels are closer to reach or just simply keeping your hands on your back and not coming into as deep of a back bend.
- **Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose)** – This pose is great for the back so if it feels uncomfortable, try backing off a bit and only gently lifting the chest up off of the ground.
- **Urdhva Mukha Svanasana (Upward Facing Dog)** – If this pose is uncomfortable, try doing Bhujangasana, a gentler version of this backbend.
- **Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose)** – This intense pose is best to be replaced with Bridge Pose (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana)
- **Savasana (Corpse Pose)** — Lying on the ground with your legs straight in front can strain the lower back. Instead, try bending your knees for this relaxing pose.

- **Salabhasana (Locust Pose)** – This spine-strengthening pose does wonders for helping backs recover from injuries. However, if you have just recently injured your back, it is best to wait until the injury heals before beginning to rebuild the area.

- **Natarajasana (Lord of the Dance Pose)** – This pose requires a flexible back and a lot of balance. It's a great way to keep the spine healthy after an injury, but is best to not be practiced if the back is currently injured.

- **Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged King Pigeon Pose)** – A backbend and hip opener, this asymmetrical pose can put a lot of pressure on the back. To modify, you can bring the front foot back closer to the body and place a block under the hip if it is lifting off of the floor.

- **Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)** – This deep fold is great for lengthening the spine and creating more space between each vertebra. If the fold seems too deep, try resting your hands on a chair or on blocks in front of your feet to reduce the pressure placed on the spine.

4. Is it normal for my back to hurt after doing yoga?

It is normal to experience some stiffness in your back a day or two after doing yoga because you are working muscles that are rarely, if ever, worked. The muscles of the back are complex and many are very small and hard to stretch and strengthen. The poses of yoga are specifically designed to access these muscles, meaning that during your practice you very well could be working a muscle for the first time, ever! Be patient with your body as it develops strength and flexibility – over time the stiffness and achy feelings will subside.

That being said, it is important to distinguish stiff, tender muscles from muscles that have been overstretched, pulled, or even injured. If after practicing a certain pose you feel sharp, shooting pains caused by specific motions, there is a chance that you may have overdone it. If this is the case, allow your body to rest and heal, seeing a doctor or specialist if necessary.

This is why it is so important to always listen to your body as you practice yoga. There is no "perfect pose" in yoga – you never want to push yourself too far all because you want to look like a picture or the person next to you. In order to benefit from yoga you need to acknowledge that your body is different from everyone else's. It has had different experiences, injuries, and even just the anatomy that you were born with is different. Once you learn that yoga is a practice meant to serve you and not the other way around, doors will open that will allow you to deepen your practice and give your body and mind exactly what they need.

5. What are some poses I should do every day to help stop low back pain?

Low back pain is incredibly common and incredibly uncomfortable. In order to help relieve the pain, you should focus on poses that stretch and strengthen the hips, especially the muscle of the piriformis, a small muscle deep in your leg that helps to rotate the hips and keep your pelvis (your "bowl of water") in proper alignment. Here are a few poses that you can do every day when you first wake up and at any time when pain in the lower back begins to show up again.

- Vrksasana (Tree Pose)
- Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend)
- Pigeon Pose

6. Can yoga help to relieve pain caused by the sciatica?

Yes, yoga is incredibly helpful for stopping sciatica pain. Oftentimes it is the tight muscles in the hips, primarily the piriformis, which cause pain in the sciatica. The tight muscles will pinch the sciatic nerve and cause shooting, burning pain up and down the leg. So, by stretching the hip muscles you can regain the space needed to take the pressure off of the nerve. The three poses listed above (Vrksasana, Uttanasana, and Pigeon) all do a great job to help ease sciatic pain.

7. Will strengthening my back help to relieve back pain?

The short answer is yes. By improving the strength of your back you will help to relieve back pain because you will be better able to hold your back in proper, straight alignment throughout the day.

However, if all you focus on is strengthening your back you will continue to be out of balance and your back will feel the pain. In addition to strengthening your back, it is important to increase its flexibility as well as loosen and strengthen the muscles of the hips and shoulders. This is why yoga is such an amazing practice for people who want to get rid of pain in their back – yoga works everything in ways that nothing else can! As a person who suffered from intense back pain for years, I can honestly say that yoga was and remains to be the only thing that keeps my back feeling awesome.

8. Is it okay if my back pops a lot when I practice yoga?

As long as the popping is not accompanied by pain, especially the shooting kind, it is fine and actually pretty common when you begin to move the body and its joints in new positions. The popping sound itself does not pose any threat to the body; it is actually produced by the release of pressure and built up nitrogen gas in the joints.

9. Twisting poses in yoga are really uncomfortable – am I doing something wrong?

Twisting poses are fantastic for helping to relieve tension in the back and increasing the flexibility of the spine. If you feel discomfort in these should-be soothing poses it is likely caused by you not lengthening your spine before you twist. It is really important to do this because in order to properly twist you need to have lots of space between each vertebra. If you twist when the vertebrae are crunched on top of each other, you will feel discomfort and will actually be doing more harm than good. Remind yourself to lengthen the spine with each inhalation while holding a twisting pose, and then use the exhalation to twist back deeper.

10. I once heard that a healthy, flexible spine is the key to being happy – is that true?

Your spine is the major highway of communication in your body. When that highway gets clogged because of injury, pain, and inflexibility, proper communication can no longer take place, making it very easy for your mind to become disconnected. And when your mind begins to wander out into the world without the support and grounding it needs from your body, you begin to feel overwhelmed, stressed, and even depressed.

Having severely injured my back several years ago in a car accident, I know from experience how important the health of the spine is in relation to mental health and happiness. I didn't realize the connection right away, but looking back I discovered that my depression coincided with the injury to my back. As I began to strengthen and heal my back, the sadness began to melt away and I rediscovered what it truly meant to be happy.

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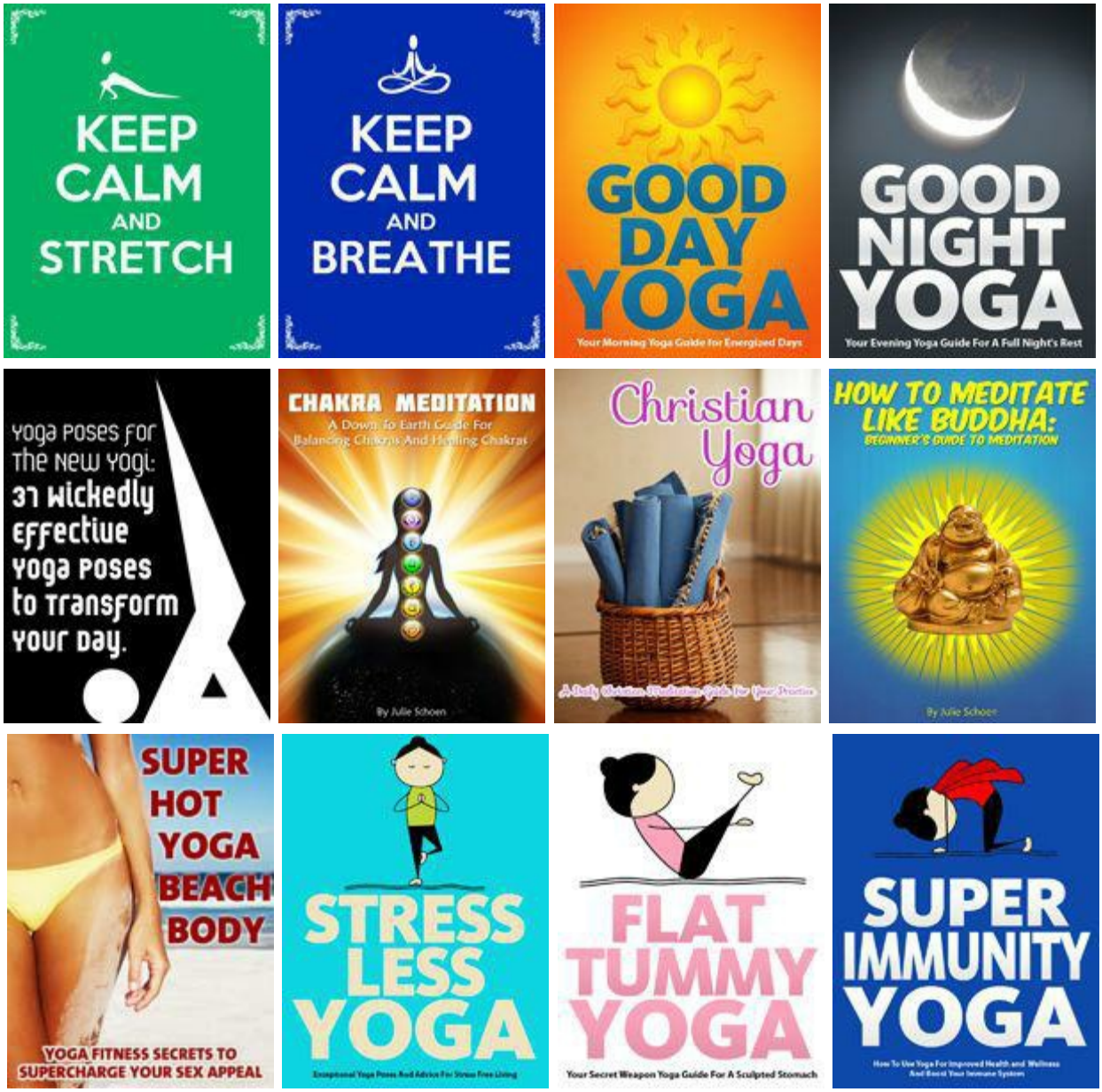
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